



Staff Sgt. Israel Del Toro works out at the Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, fitness center every other day. Before

his injuries in Afghanistan, he weighed 190 pounds and used to bench press about 300 pounds.

The road to recovery

story and photos by Tech. Sgt. Cecilio M. Ricardo Jr.

After three months in a coma and three more months of intense physical therapy, Staff Sgt. Israel Del Toro pushed himself to recover enough just so he could walk a few steps.

That was important to the tactical air controller as he recovered from the burns that cover nearly 80 percent of his body. He was determined to walk on his own when Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley presented him with the Purple Heart and Army Commendation medals.

The few steps he took the day of his award ceremony, June 23, 2006, represented a world of pain, grief, hard work, love and support. Overcome with emotion, he had little to say.

"I'm not a big-speech guy," Sergeant Del Toro managed to say.

Sergeant Del Toro received his injuries when an improvised explosive device exploded near him while he was on patrol in a village in Afghanistan in December 2005.

The incident

As one of the Airmen helping fight the war on terrorism on the ground, the sergeant was part of an Army scout team supporting two Army

companies. The team was tracking a group of Taliban fighters in some mountains, when the insurgents escaped into a village.

The Taliban lured the team into a surprise attack. When the explosive went off, it smashed the left side of Sergeant Del Toro's Humvee, engulfing him in flames and suffocating him in a cloud of smoke.

"(Army) Lt. Brian Findley rolled me on the ground and tried to put the fire out," Sergeant Del Toro said. "It wasn't enough."

Lieutenant Findley ran with the sergeant to a nearby river, where he jumped in and extinguished the flames.

Sergeant Del Toro says he remembers trying to call in air support and a doctor telling him he was going to make it. His next memory was of waking up from a coma three months later at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

Getting the call

But his fellow Airmen had been busy from the moment they found out of the sergeant's injuries. Hours after that surprise attack, Sergeant Del Toro's wife, Carmen, received a call where she was staying in Mexico. Lt. Col. Wayne Canipe, the 4th Air Support Operations Group commander, called to tell her what had happened.

The Del Toros had been stationed in Vicenza, Italy, home of the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade. But while he was in Afghanistan, Mrs. del Toro and their son, Israel, were staying with family in Mexico.

Colonel Canipe told her what had happened and that her husband would soon arrive at the medical center and that she needed to be there by his side.

It would prove to be a challenge getting the Del Toros to San Antonio. Mrs. Del Toro had an expired visa and didn't have enough money to buy airline tickets to San Antonio.

"When this happened, I called all his family members," she said.

Sergeant Del Toro said his wife is normally a shy and nurturing person. But she soon realized she had to take charge to help her husband recover.

"I'm not used to being the strong one, but this time I was," she said. "I tried to call the Mexican embassy for help. I explained my situation, but they basically said to go to the back of the line."

Fortunately, Colonel Canipe, with help from Alex Palermo, Vicenza Casualty Assistance Center officer in charge and chief of military personnel divisions for U.S. Army Garrison, Vicenza, reached the appropriate authorities. They soon had the documents to expedite her temporary visa. In San Antonio, Chief Master Sgt. Ralph Humphrey, a family liaison officer at Randolph Air Force Base, sped up the finance process.

Within three days, the Air Force managed to expedite the visa documents, acquire three plane tickets — for Mrs. Del Toro, Israel and Sergeant Del Toro's aunt — and get the family to the sergeant's bedside.

Waking up to reality

Sergeant Del Toro woke up from his medication-induced three-month coma to find out he had burns on about 80 percent of his body. The tips of his fingers on his right hand were burned off up to the first knuckles. Doctors had to amputate his left hand, and he lost some vision in both his eyes.

"I could have been bitter and depressed," he said. "And at times, I was. I mean, who wouldn't be?"

But the sergeant doesn't elaborate much on the emotional trauma he went through as he recovered. Instead, he credits most of his positive outlook to a Soldier he met at the military's premiere burn center.

"He was worse off than I was," said the 31-year-old from Chicago. "But he had the greatest attitude."

Sergeant Del Toro also attributes the motivation he had for a speedy recovery to his wife and son.

"I think about setting an example for my son and being there for him in his time of need," the nine-year Air Force veteran said.

Healing

Sergeant Del Toro's recovery takes hard work and is painful as his body continues to heal.

"He healed really quickly for what he has been through," said Staff Sgt. Olga Hudson, an Airman and family readiness flight member at Randolph, who also helped the family with errands and translated for Mrs. Del Toro.

"I know there are guys in the hospital who got there before he did (with lesser injuries) and they're still in the hospital," Sergeant Hudson said.

Sergeant Del Toro's fast recovery earned him an early release from the hospital in May 2006. On June 23, with more than 200 family, military and civilian members watching, he walked for the first time to receive his medals at a ceremony solely dedicated to honoring his accomplishments.

"You've come a long way to be able to walk," General Moseley said. "You represent everything that's good about the Air Force."

Sergeant Del Toro continues to heal rapidly. Each day, he undergoes physical therapy at the medical center. Then he has a personal workout session at the Randolph fitness center.

The sergeant's hard work amazes Sgt. Shane Elder, a Soldier who is an assistant physical therapist at the medical center.

"People don't normally survive from these types of injuries," Sergeant Elder said. "The percentage of his burns was unserviceable 10 years ago. But with the growth of modern (medical) science and Sergeant Del Toro's strong will, he could become fully independent again."

Telling the Air Force message

Sergeant Del Toro is thinking the same thing. And despite his ongoing therapy, he is not through with the Air Force. When not busy recovering, he has been touring Air Force bases, speaking to Airmen about the importance of being prepared for deployments. And he talks to them about being responsible Airmen and noncommissioned officers. He even took part in a panel that focused on what type of combat award the Air Force should institute for its warfighters.

Sergeant Del Toro said his devotion to duty and his strong patriotic feelings allow him to put things in perspective as he pays respect to those who came before him.

"I don't see myself as a hero," he said. "I'm just a regular guy who got hurt while doing his job."

Sergeant Del Toro's recovery has not been easy, but his drive to be with his family has made it faster.

"I don't know if I just have more drive or good genes that help me heal faster," he said.

Now back with his family, the sergeant is concentrating on getting well enough to return to duty, whatever that duty may be. It doesn't matter to him. He just wants to wear his uniform each day.

"I want to be a controller again," he said. "But if I can't, if my calling is the speaking circuit — and that's the best way I can help the Air Force — then so be it. I just want to stay in the Air Force."

Editor's note: On a visit to Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, in February, General Moseley promoted Sergeant Del Toro to technical sergeant for his many contributions and for telling the Air Force story and the importance of the Air Force's role in the war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Sergeant Del Toro's wife, Carmen, helps him eat, bathe and dress daily. She also helps nurse his wounds.